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ABSTRACT

This paper reports the results of a study involving over 2,000 college faculty members concerning the course goals they hope their students will achieve as a result of the material taught, the teaching technique, and the general intellectual environment in the classroom. The common interest of most instructors is the desire to develop the student's ability to think independently and critically and to be able to evaluate ideas, issues, and situations. Such goals are viewed as rewarding and involve broadening the student's intellectual vistas, teaching them to organize and clarify their thinking, helping them develop critical-thinking skills, teaching them how to analyze problems and follow logical approaches to situations, and encouraging them to discover and express their own ideas and thoughts. All disciplines, it is noted, contribute in their unique way to the student's personal growth, but no discipline alone provides all the answers to thinking and problem solving. The study concluded that no matter what the field or discipline, faculty who set personal development goals for their students stress multiple approaches to problem solving and the ability to evaluate, to think critically, and to be open to new possibilities. (GLR)

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IMPROVING COLLEGE TEACHING AND LEARNING

Personal Growth as a Faculty Goal for Students

When college and university instructors plan and teach their courses, they have a number of goals in mind that they hope their students will achieve as a result of the material taught, the teaching technique, and the general intellectual environment in the classroom.

NCRIPTAL research into over two thousand faculty members' goals revealed a wide range of aims. The goals reported by introductory course instructors from twelve different college-level fields and disciplines ranged from (1) having the student acquire specific knowledge from the academic field and (2) developing specific skills to (3) preparing students for future courses in the field or discipline and (4) helping students acquire critical and independent thinking skills. Often embedded in the broader goals that instructors listed was the goal of personal growth and development of students as individuals.

A Common Thread

Even though the route that instructors hope personal growth will take varies by discipline and field, there is a common thread among academic fields as diverse as business and fine arts, languages and nursing, and mathematics and sociology. That thread is the desire to develop student's ability to think independently and critically and to be able to evaluate ideas, issues, and situations in the world around them. Like a hand-spun strand of wool, this thread is thicker or more pronounced in fields such as sociology, psychology, and biology and thinner or less pronounced in fields like mathematics and fine arts.

What Thinking Skills Do Students Bring to Higher Education?

Psychological research shows that some students entering colleges and universities tend to think in a dualistic manner (Perry, 1981). These students tend to judge situations as right or wrong, good or bad, or black or white without a great deal of thought as to why they have made these judgments. They have often not thought about a situation, issue, or problem themselves but have appealed to

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authorities to provide answers and to make judgments for them. For such students, faculty members often become authority figures, arbiters of what is and isn't and what should and shouldn't be. Students may come into a course wanting the instructor to tell them the "truth," and they may believe that if they listen hard enough, memorize enough facts or equations or theorems, and study a sufficient number of hours, they too will gain the absolute knowledge they believe the instructor has of a discipline or field.

The Job of the Instructor in Fostering Personal Growth of Students

Instructors presented with students who are dualistic in their intellectual development are faced with the task of helping them discover that neither the discipline, nor the world, is full of absolute truths or rights and wrongs. The task of guiding students along the path of personal growth by means of independent thought is not an easy one, but judging from the responses of faculty members in diverse fields, it is an exciting, rewarding, and challenging goal.

Instructors whose goal is to help students grow intellectually often speak about broadening the students' intellectual vistas, teaching them to organize and clarify their thinking, helping them develop critical-thinking skills, teaching them how to analyze problems and follow logical approaches to situations, and encouraging them to discover and express their own ideas and thoughts. Many instructors see this process as helping students gain self-confidence in their own thinking abilities and teaching them to express these ideas and thoughts clearly and succinctly in written and oral forms.

There Are No Simple Answers

The task of fostering personal growth in students, as expressed in faculty goals, involves helping students realize that there is seldom just one answer or one way of solving a problem, that no one person can have all the answers, that thinking is fun and challenging, that there are rarely simple answers, that learning is a life-long process, and that learning in the classroom must be applied to all of life. As a result, faculty who list the personal growth of their students as a course goal attempt to expose students to multiple methods and approaches to thinking and problem solving while challenging them to be open to new ideas. These faculty also try to teach concepts of relative thinking, and they ask students to evaluate, analyze, and think of problems and issues in terms of certain contexts.

In Perry's terms, faculty attempt to pull students out of dualistic patterns of thought and into relativistic approaches to thinking. Students are encouraged to welcome a diversity of opinions and values and to make their own judgments based on evidence, logical patterns, and systems of thought. They come to realize that judgments are often based on a complex set of underlying assumptions and that these assumptions must be known if informed thought is to take place. Students also come to understand that knowledge and "truth" are qualitative and may vary, depending on the context. Faculty hope students' thinking will become more relativistic and less dualistic.

Differences in Disciplines and Fields

Faculty members' definitions of "personal development" may vary. Since faculty members are usually best trained in a single field, they often view that field as providing a particularly valuable perspective for helping students approach the problems they will face throughout life. Historians tend to see the ideas, trends, and context of certain political or cultural situations from the past as providing a particularly valuable method of thinking about and approaching problems of the present. Faculty members who teach languages feel that knowledge of different

cultures and ways of expressing ideas is a key to the relativistic thinking that students need to develop in their college careers. Literature professors feel that literature and the perspective it provides on the human condition is a valuable tool in learning to think. Sociologists and psychologists see their methods of thought and analysis as providing particularly valuable insights and experiences for students who are developing intellectually and personally. Clearly, all disciplines and fields contribute their own methods of approaching and analyzing problems, and students can learn a great deal from being aware of the many approaches to thinking and problem solving within and between fields.

Unanimity Within Diversity

No matter what the field or discipline, faculty in our study who set personal development goals for their students stress multiple approaches to problem solving and the ability to evaluate, to think critically, to observe without bias, to express ideas and thoughts clearly in written and oral form, and to be open to new possibilities. Based on this unanimity within diversity, the enhancement of personal and intellectual growth provides an excellent argument for requiring students to take courses in a wide variety of fields at an early stage in their college careers.

—Beverly Cameron

Reference

Perry, W. J., Jr. (1981). Cognitive and ethical growth: The making of meaning. In A. W. Chickering, Ed., *The Modern American College*.
San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

This **Accent** is based on the research of Joan S. Stark and Malcolm A. Lowther and the staff of NCRIPTAL's research program on Curriculum Design: Influences and Impacts. The information was gleaned from an NCRIPTAL study of over four thousand course goals reported by more than two thousand faculty members in twelve different academic fields (business, composition, educational psychology, nursing, literature, history, sociology, psychology, biology, mathematics, fine arts, and Romance languages).

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